

Building Back Better: Expanding Career Pathways for Women

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Apprentices Lorena Rivera and Mallory Martindale

Women workers have made significant contributions throughout the pandemic and on behalf of the country's continued economic recovery. Frontline workers, the majority of them women, have risked their lives serving the public. Working moms have struggled to balance enormous full-time caregiving responsibilities while also staying connected to the workforce. Despite these efforts, the number of adult women employed is now 3.6% lower than before the pandemic – a decrease of 2.6 million overall. Declines remain especially dramatic for women of color: Black women's employment is down 5.3% and Hispanic women's employment is down 3.9% since February 2020. Creating and expanding promising career pathways for women, particularly women of color, is necessary for an equitable recovery and will play a key role in not just restoring our nation's economy, but improving it.

As the Biden-Harris administration proposes large new investments in the apprenticeship system, the U.S. Department of Labor's Women's Bureau continues to expand pathways to better jobs through the Women in Apprenticeship and Nontraditional Occupations (WANTO) grant program. WANTO seeks to increase the number of women in registered apprenticeships as well as historically male-dominated jobs with higher wages, and has provided nearly \$12 million to 22 community organizations since 2017.

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Why apprenticeship? It's a proven training model that helps people develop the skills for a high-paying career while earning a paycheck at the same time. On average, the starting salary of an apprenticeship graduate is \$72,000 a year. Unfortunately, data shows apprenticeships are not as accessible to women as they should be. As of 2020, only 12.5% of apprentices were women, even though women comprised nearly half of the overall U.S. workforce. In the male-dominated trades, such as construction, women were just 3.6% of apprentices.

A distinguishing factor of the WANTO program has been its comprehensive approach. WANTO grantees provide job skills training programs to prepare women for promising careers, while simultaneously helping employers create a work culture that better facilitates women's success. WANTO grants also provide funding for child care, transportation, tuition expenses, and work-related tools and gear. Evidence shows that women participate and succeed in job training programs at higher rates when they receive supportive services. This year, in response to the disproportionate effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on women of color, the WANTO program is also prioritizing outreach to workers of color and other historically underrepresented communities.

The Women's Bureau's WANTO grant program is one of the only federal funding sources focused exclusively on women workers. It has directly supported approximately 5,800 women since 2017. Going forward, the Women's Bureau will continue to advocate for policies and programs that promote better career pathways for women, particularly women of color, empowering workers, their families, and their communities, as we build the economy back better.

Reeba Daniel is a policy analyst for the U.S. Department of Labor's Women's Bureau. Follow the Women's Bureau on Twitter at @WB_DOL.

Tags: Women's Bureau, WANTO, Women in Apprenticeship and Non-Traditional Occupations program, National Apprenticeship Week, nontraditional occupations, women in the trades, in-demand jobs

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